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Beyond beauty

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BEYOND *Beauty*

THREE WOMEN SHARE HOW PAGEANTS CHANGED THEIR LIVES

BY **JACQUELINE CORDOVA** DESIGN **KALEY LEMPKE** PHOTOGRAPHY **JESSICA DARLAND**



PAULI ESCOBEDO, NOW A LECTURER AT IOWA STATE, HELD THE TITLE OF MISS IOWA IN 2010.

Nightgown, check. Bathing suit, check. Shoes, check. The list could go on for what a pageant girl needs. For some of the students and alumni at Iowa State this checklist is extremely familiar, although they wish others would see that the competition goes beyond just the beauty portion.

"All you ever really see is the dresses and the fake smiles on stage. I've never really cared much for them because of that reason. Who wants to watch a bunch of girls play dress up?" said one junior in English education. This is a common view, but for some people in the Iowa State community, it hasn't been the reality.

A closer look at the Miss America Organization shows that judges score the girls based on evening gown, talent, interview, and lifestyle and fitness. The evening gown and lifestyle and fitness categories each make up 20 percent of the total score, whereas the interview is worth 25 percent and a talent is 35.

Pauli Escobedo, a lecturer at Iowa State University and former Miss Iowa, takes huge pride in her accomplishments within the industry due to her interview skills.

When she was only six years old she started doing pageants to help her with the skills she was learning in the speech class her mom placed her in. She started at the Little Miss Scott County.

At 12, Escobedo decided she was determined to be the first woman in the NBA. She saw herself more as a tomboy who was too cool for pageants. It wasn't until she was 20 that she ran into the person who worked with the Little Miss Scott County pageant who suggested Escobedo jump back into the pageant world. She wasn't planning to compete again, but the scholarships that can be gained from the competitions swayed her decision.

"I ended up catching the bug and I competed in Miss Iowa after I won my local [pageant] as Miss Scott County," says Escobedo.



After four years of participating in pageants, Escobedo finally became Miss Iowa 2010. This later led her to the nationally televised Miss America stage. Escobedo faced heavy pressure to fill the shoes of being a skinny, tall and beautiful pageant girl, with many people trying to tell her she needed to look a certain way.

Glitz and glam might be the cover photo, but behind the scenes it can be a different story. Escobedo struggled with her weight. She never saw herself as overweight or obese, but there was a time in her life when she suffered from a body image disorder. She says her family and the other pageant contestants encouraged her to change her unhealthy thoughts and live a healthier lifestyle.

She didn't end up making it in the top ten but took great pride in her interview skills. Escobedo won the Non-Finalist Interview Award, which meant she had the highest score out of everyone who hadn't made it in the top ten.

"To be able to be recognized for my ability to express myself and share my opinions is something I take great pride in. I don't walk around in an evening gown or a bathing suit all the time but I do talk to people everyday," says Escobedo.

Escobedo won almost \$12,000 in scholarship money and wanted to put it to good use. After receiving her undergraduate degree in Kinesiology, her career focus changed thanks to her time as a titleholder.

While being interviewed as Miss Iowa, a judge suggested that she look into working in broadcast. Escobedo took the judge's advice and met with some professionals in broadcasting who also believed that broadcast was something in which she would do well. After landing a job as a television reporter for WQAD in the Quad Cities, she ended up returning to Iowa State to get her master's degree in journalism and mass communications.

After her time as Miss Iowa and a reporter, Escobedo didn't leave the pageant life for good. She currently runs the little and junior Miss Iowa pageants and has stayed involved as an active mentor for other girls in the pageant system. Knowing former pageant winners were people she looked up to, she hoped she could be a role model to other girls. Escobedo also makes sure to attend Miss Iowa every year since her time with the crown.

Miss America Organization is very proud that it is "one of the largest providers of scholarships to women in the world." This is a huge factor that drives a lot of the girls who pursue pageants, like Kelly Koch, an Iowa State student and the current Miss Iowa. (She is taking this school year off to focus on the title.)

Koch was crowned as Miss Iowa in June of 2016, a highlight of a journey she started almost two years previously. Koch wanted to be able to provide towards her education since being a student athlete didn't come with a small price tag.



When first starting pageants, she wasn't really too sure what to expect, but the end result became a new look toward her future goals and aspirations.

Koch says she found her calling while in the process of competing. During the Miss Iowa week, Koch got the opportunity to visit the children's hospital in Iowa City. During that visit, Koch got the opportunity to meet a child life specialist, which is someone who focuses on ensuring that children are able to live comfortably and have all their needs met as they spend their time in the hospital. Something sparked and Koch found herself in love with this profession. She changed her major in hopes of one day becoming a child life specialist.

Koch was so passionate about the profession that she chose to include the Pinky Swear Foundation, an organization devoted to helping children with cancer, in her Miss Iowa platform. A platform in the Miss America contest is a cause for which

they will volunteer time, bring awareness, raise money and educate others.

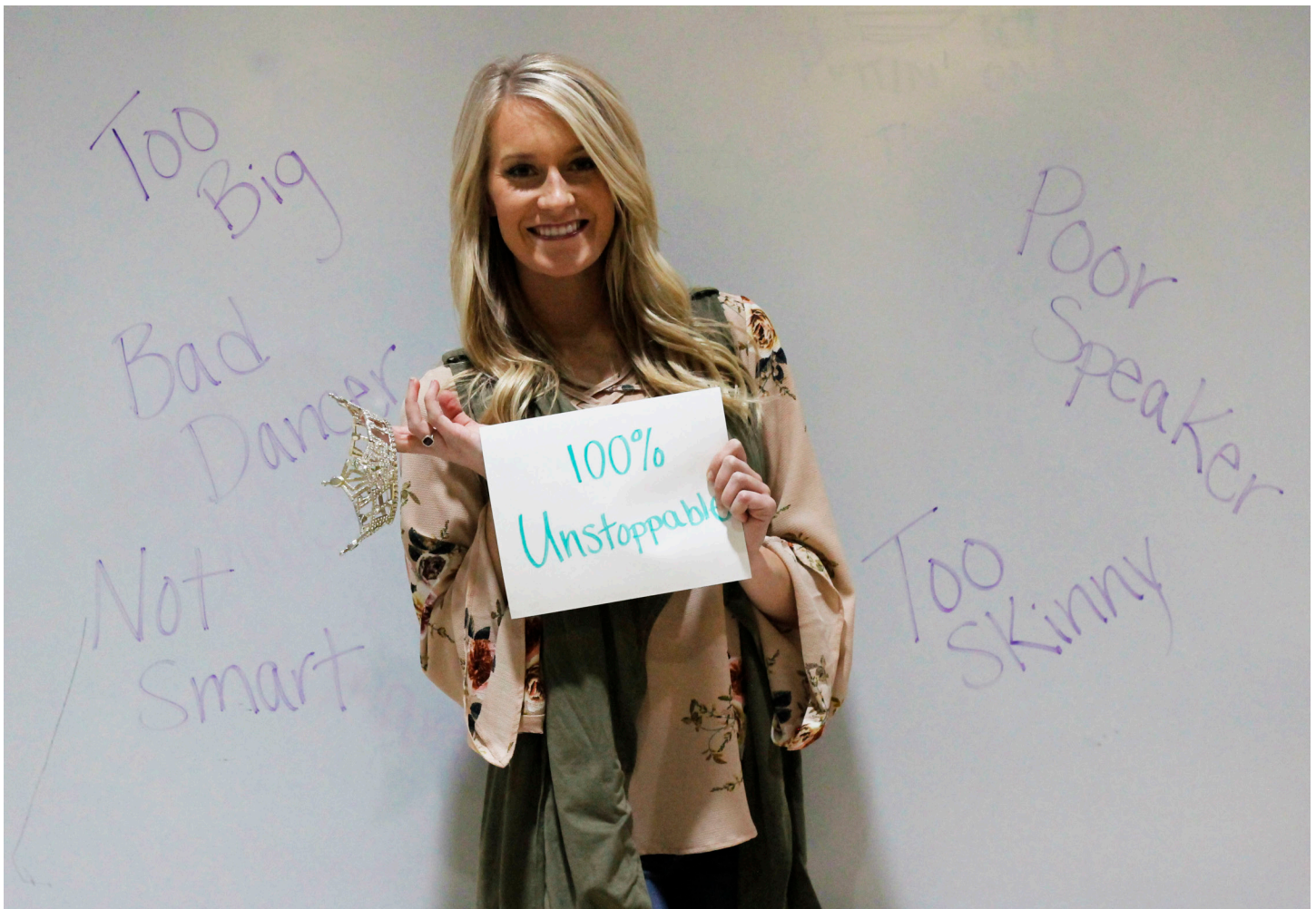
Koch walked into the experience hoping it would enhance her education but instead she ended up gaining skills she could use in her future endeavors. Koch says she valued the interview skills she gained from the process because of how much she had to talk to judges and while competing and her awareness to current life events.

"People think, 'Oh you're a beauty queen?' [but] it's a scholarship-based program where I had to focus on things more than what I look like," says Koch. "Your talent is your highest-scored portion so you have to be able to present a well-crafted skill you have, and I got to showcase my dancing."

Koch, standing at only 5 feet 2 inches tall, laughs at the perceived stereotypical body type of a pageant winner. She says that everyone comes with different talents, body shapes, platforms and overall personas — there isn't just one story and one look.

For Johannah Vittetoe, a senior in elementary education, her road to pageantry was a little different. With an eating disorder that almost led her to being hospitalized, pageants became her motivation. She was faced with a decision of either being placed into partial hospitalization program or finding an alternative that would help lead her to healthier decisions. Her parents wouldn't allow her to compete until she gained a certain weight — she was 5 feet 9 inches tall and weighed only 107 pounds. Pageants became the light at the end of the tunnel for her on her road to recovery.

It took her three months to reach her goal weight. In February of her sophomore year of college, she competed in the Miss Burlington pageant. When competing at Miss Burlington she got first-runner up but enjoyed doing the competition so much she didn't want to stop. Vittetoe went on to compete at Sweeps, which



JOHANNAH VITTETOE, THE FIRST RUNNER-UP IN THE 2016 MISS IOWA COMPETITION, SAYS PAGEANTS HAVE HELPED HER THROUGH PERSONAL STRUGGLES.

is another local pageant that gives girls the opportunity to have a title that is an alternative route to the Miss Iowa stage.

Something that had started off as therapeutic in her fight to beat her eating disorder became something she really loved. She found herself more confident and comfortable in her skin. After making it to the Miss Iowa stage she says she was a different person than she was when she first started competing.

When she made it to the Miss Iowa pageant this past year, things began to change. Her platform shifted as she became more open about her past struggles with eating disorders. She says she took this new opportunity as a chance to be a voice and role model for girls who could relate to her struggles.

With a new path to follow, Vittetoe faced a new hurdle: She was crowned first runner-up at this year's Miss Iowa competition.

Vittetoe says that it was hard, and some days she wanted to just hide in her room and stay in with her family while trying to process that she had lost the competition after having worked so hard.

Vittetoe stayed strong and found comfort from her mentors and the girls she had competed with. Today she looks on the brighter side, sees how far she's come in her health and celebrates the lifelong friends she's made and the new skills she's obtained by going through the pageant process.

Going forward, Vittetoe hopes to take a break and focus on herself, her education and the road to becoming an educator someday. Although the pageant stereotypes can lead to the idea of perfection, Vittetoe says she loves the industry and has grown into a happier, healthier person because of her experience. Still, she doesn't shy away from discussing the hardship

that can come from the competition and how to handle that with grace.

"You can't walk into it saying you will win, it's about knowing that you can win. It might be today or might be in a month. It could be next year for all you know. It's important to just remember that you have a chance every time," says Vittetoe optimistically when talking about her future in pageants and advice for others.

While stereotypes can lead to seeing only the glamour of the dresses and high heels, many people like Escobedo, Vittetoe and Koch staunchly defend pageants and the positive influence they've had in their lives. They all agree that it's not always about what you're wearing and how perfect your body looks — they each have their own stories that show a different side of pageantry, beyond the "pretty dress." 